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THE TRUE SIGNIFICANCE OF SIDGWICK'S  
"ETHICS."I. *Sidgwick's Empiricist Sympathies.*

To English-speaking students the "Methods of Ethics" should have peculiar interest as representing, on first sight, the typical form of English thought. "The English thinker keeps as close as possible to phenomena, and the principles which he uses in the explanation of phenomena, themselves lie in the realm of concrete experience. He keeps constantly in touch with the popular consciousness. His reverence for reality . . . and his distrust of far-reaching abstraction are strong."\* True of most of Sidgwick's predecessors, those words appear, to superficial readers of his work, true of Sidgwick also.

In aim and sympathies he was, it will probably be admitted, an Empiricist. But Empiricism has for years been losing its hold on the land of its birth and development. True to the long and distinguished line of his empiricist predecessors, true also to his own sympathies, Sidgwick refused to associate himself with the Idealistic invasion, unconscious, perhaps, that the irruptive forces had already broken into the citadel of his own thought. Thus at a time when German ideas threatened to inundate the Universities of Britain he stood as a sympathizer with, if not a representative of, the less ambitious, though not less important type of thought which goes by the name of Empiricism.

II. *Special Merits of the "Methods of Ethics."*

The "Methods of Ethics" is important for another reason. It possesses a merit to which no ethical work, except that of Aristotle, can lay an equal claim, the merit of transparent fairness and honesty. So extreme, at times, is Sidgwick's desire to be absolutely judicial that he leaves his readers in some per-

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\*Falckenberg, "History of Modern Philosophy," Eng. translation, p. 84.

plexity as to his own positive attitude. He is conscious of merits and, still more, of demerits in every ethical system. We are wont to regard him as a Utilitarian and as a critic of Intuitionism, but he is aware of the many difficulties in the former system, and of so much truth in the latter that his most constructive chapter is headed, "Philosophical Intuitionism." We are wont to regard him as a critic of Kant, yet, as we shall presently see, he borrows from Kant the leading doctrine of the "*Grundlegung*" (the doctrine of impartiality of judgment) and the leading *motif* of Idealism (emphasis on rationality of conduct). He has a good word for Egoism, even though the result of his examination thereof apparently is that "a dubious guidance to a despicable end"\* is all that the Hedonistic calculus has to offer." Few are the maxims which he permits to pass unscathed through his critical mill; for these, however, we are thankful, well-assured that they have made out a good claim to validity.

Thus the chief philosophical excellences of Sidgwick are critical acumen and honesty of aim; his chief defect, absence of constructive power. These, taken together, leave upon the mind of each reader a feeling of negativeness, paralyzing at first to some, stimulating to others, valuable to all, pleasant to none. As a constructive ethical work, the "Methods of Ethics" is confessedly a failure; construction was not its aim. As a critical *propædæutic* to positive works it is invaluable and unique. The ethical systems of the future will be all the better for the appearance of a work which might well be called (to borrow Kantian terminology), "Prolegomena to every future system of Ethical Philosophy which can claim to rank as Science."

### III. *Sidgwick's Critical Treatment of Idealism.*

We have emphasized this aspect of Sidgwick's work because it is now our duty to call attention to one instance (fortunately quite a solitary one) in which his impartiality is not so obvious. Though never consciously unfair to Idealism, he felt

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\*"Methods of Ethics," Book III., ch. 1.

himself out of sympathy with it, though, as we shall presently see, there were strong Idealistic undercurrents in his own mind. In his "Methods" he never did full justice, even critically, to its point of view. He occasionally refers to it; he criticizes a few of its minor characteristics, but he never faces the weighty metaphysical arguments of Green and Green's successors. The want, it is true, is to some extent supplied by his article on "Green's Ethics" which he contributed to the pages of *Mind*. But in view of the influential position of Oxford thought, it is astounding that a five-edition treatise on the leading methods of Ethics should devote only a few scattered remarks (mainly footnotes) to the most important of contemporary systems, and that Idealism, so far as dealt with in the text, should be treated merely as a form, and not, apparently, a leading form of Intuitionism. For every other system he has a word of praise; every other system he treats with seriousness and respect; his treatment of this by means of a few *en passant* strictures, is perfunctory and inadequate. No reader of the "Methods" unacquainted with contemporary events would imagine that, at the time Sidgwick wrote, Idealism in Britain was a powerful, growing, and apparently victorious system of thought; the inference would rather be that the prevailing system was a crude Intuitionism, after which, as a good second, came Egoism. To the students of the future, Sidgwick's book will therefore convey an altogether wrong impression of nineteenth century thought, and the error will not be removed by an examination of the same author's "Outlines of the History of Ethics," in which the work of Green is represented by less than two pages of exposition.\*

#### IV. Sidgwick's Eclecticism.

We might almost say that Sidgwick was inspired by a *furor* for compromising. His system is *prima facie* the most remarkable ethical compromise in existence. He seems to have had a suspicion of any pretentious and apparently homogeneous system of thought, convinced, no doubt, that any such system

was dowered from birth with failure. He refused, therefore, to add to their number, and preferred rather to examine keenly existing systems, to select from each its kernel of truth after the husk has been removed by his powerful criticism, and then to present these fragments to the world, uncoördinated and almost unsystematized. Such was his task, useful, no doubt, perhaps supremely useful. It may be that all systems are doomed to fall, and if so the philosopher who saves from the wreckage of each a solitary truth, is performing a more valuable task than one who seeks again to construct where so many predecessors have failed. But the result to which Sidgwick leads us is remarkable in the extreme, and by Kant would have been regarded with horror and contempt. For Sidgwick has done what Kant, at the outset of his ethical treatises, declared fatal to the truth of the science; he has not "begun with pure philosophy (metaphysic) without which there cannot be any moral philosophy at all"; on the contrary he has "mingled pure principles with empirical," and hence his treatise "does not deserve the name of philosophy."\*

Criticism, compromise, and empiricist sympathies are, then, some of the most striking features of Sidgwick's thought. We find them in two predecessors with whom he had much in common, Butler and Reid. When "Common Sense" rationalizes it becomes Eclecticism; Sidgwick was to a large extent an Eclectic. This fact will become more obvious as we proceed, for it is now our duty to point out, what has been already suggested, that, in spite of his empiricist sympathies, and his love of criticism and compromise, Sidgwick had been powerfully though unconsciously influenced by the system he despised. His empiricism, like that of Mill, had yielded here and there to the pressures of deeper thought.

#### *V. Outline of the Kantian Elements in Sidgwick's Ethics.*

We have already referred incidentally to the emphasis laid by Sidgwick on "rationality" of conduct. "Right" he invari-

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\*"Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals," Abbot's translation, p. 5.

ably interprets in the sense of "rational." Kant does the same. The main difference between the two philosophers is that while Kant establishes the claims of reason by a lengthy argument, Sidgwick does little more than assert them. Here, as elsewhere in his work, whenever he stood on the brink of a great positive doctrine Sidgwick shrank back, refusing to embark upon the treacherous sea of construction and preferring rather the loved and familiar fields of criticism and negation. But the fact that throughout his great work he equates "right" with "rational" is significant in the extreme.

Again, when he admits that the notion of "oughtness" or "rightness" must be taken as "ultimate and unanalyzable"\* he breaks still further with Hedonism and Empiricism. No consistent Hedonist would admit that the notion is "ultimate," and the few who would admit it to be "unanalyzable" would only do so on the ground that a meaningless notion is no notion at all, and therefore certainly unanalyzable. Hedonists contend that, if there is any validity in the notion of "oughtness," the notion is capable of further analysis into "conduciveness to happiness or to absence of misery." Sidgwick, therefore, in identifying "oughtness" or "rightness" with "reasonableness," and maintaining that the notion represented by these words is fundamental to ethics, is far removed from the position of a consistent Hedonism.

But in his apotheosis of reason he goes still further; he admits that reason can act as a motive to the will. This, as Professor Sorley† points out is really the question of questions in Ethics, and any intelligible doctrine of the Freedom of the Will must have as its basis the free motivity of Reason.‡ Such free motivity has always been denied by consistent Hedonists such as Hume. "Reason is, and ought only to be, the slave of the passions." "Reason can never of itself be any motive to the Will." If the cognition of an act as "right" or "reasonable"

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\*"Methods of Ethics," Part I., ch. 3.

† "Ethics of Naturalism," p. 16-17.

‡ "We admit at once that if (man) is not free or self-determined in his motive, he is not free at all."—Green: "Prolegomena to Ethics," § 97.

does, as Sidgwick admits, "give an impulse or motive to action,"\* the function of reason cannot be merely ancillary; reason is itself a spring of action, and Hedonism is therefore psychologically and ethically unsound. We are reminded of Kant's words; "Our existence has a different and far nobler end (than happiness or satisfaction), for which, and not for happiness, reason is properly intended."† Though Sidgwick shrank from drawing such an inference as this, and refused to interpret the Summum Bonum in any except a Hedonistic sense, his admission that reason can give a motive to action is really fatal even to his highly attenuated Hedonism.

Again, as already pointed out incidentally, and as admitted by Sidgwick himself,‡ the maxim of "Justice" expounded in the "Methods" bears a close resemblance to the Categorical Imperative of Kant. "Whatever action any of us judges to be right for himself he implicitly judges to be right for all similar persons in similar circumstances." "Act on a maxim that you can will to be law universal." We shall see later that these two principles are not identical, but that they are closely related is obvious on the first glance.

One further case of parallel thought between these two thinkers is presented by the way in which each of them extricates himself from the Antinomy of Practical Reason. Kant, when faced by the facts of an experience which does not reveal an invariable connection between virtue and happiness, falls back upon the postulates of God and Immortality.§ Sidgwick brought to a very similar *impasse* sees no other exit therefrom than the theological one, though his confidence in this non-ethical solution of ethical difficulties appears to have been less than was the case with Kant. We say "appears," because in the last and very highly characteristic chapter of the "Methods," his attitude towards the theological problem is, while professedly impartial, really negative rather than posi-

\*"Methods," Part I., ch. 3.

† "Fundamental Principles," Abbot's translation, p. 12.

‡ "Methods," Part I., ch. 13.

§ "Critique of Practical Reason," Abbot's translation, p. 210 *seq.*

tive. But, as pointed out above, Sidgwick never did full expository justice even to his own positive doctrines, and therefore the negative impression which is conveyed by this most important chapter may be a wrong one. In any case, he was, throughout his work consistent in his avoidance of ultimate metaphysical solutions.

## VI. *Sidgwick's Treatment of Egoistic Hedonism.*

In spite of the important Idealistic or Rationalistic elements which we have shown to exist in his philosophy and most of which are, in his case, traceable, perhaps, to Butler, rather than Kant, Sidgwick did not professedly break with Hedonism. He criticises, it is true, Egoistic Hedonism, with keenness and severity, but he cannot free himself from the belief that the system he criticised must have a place in Ethics. Psychological Hedonism, however, he utterly and finally overthrows; men's actions are not always, nor even usually, directed deliberately at happiness. He even admits, as the "fundamental paradox of Hedonism," that a conscious striving for personal happiness, is, unless carefully limited, destructive of the very happiness for which it strives. But, while admitting all this, he clings to the Hedonistic view that the Summum Bonum can only be expressed in terms of happiness, or, as he calls it, "Desirable Consciousness"; and that an egoistic striving after it, tempered by a knowledge of the above "paradox," is a duty. "I ought to seek my own happiness" is a principle which he regards as categorical and intuitive.

When, however, we take this principle in connection with others which he lays down with equal confidence, its Hedonism becomes less pronounced. "Oughtness" or "rightness" is equivalent, he tells us, to "Reasonableness." It is reasonable to seek my own happiness. What is the motive to such action? Does the motive lie in the *end*, or in the *reasonableness*? If in the former, then Sidgwick is a Hedonist; if in the latter, he is not. Now he has admitted that the reasonableness of an act supplies a motive to its performance. We may claim, therefore, that on his own showing Reason is the fundamental ethical principle, and that the famous declaration of Hume that



it "is, and ought to be, the slave of the passions" is erroneous. Reason has no mere ancillary function to Feeling; it is the judge before whose bar all feelings have to appear. But surely it is more even than that. It is, in the only possible sense of the term, a "free cause," operative, no doubt, among feelings, but contributing a principle which cannot be explained by feeling; a cause whose activity is aided here and checked there by favorable or unfavorable conditions, but which yet contains the potentiality of passing judgment on the very conditions which further or hamper it. Such, we conceive are the inferences we must draw, though the language is not his, from Sidgwick's two important admissions that Rationality supplies a motive to the will, and is itself an "ultimate and unanalyzable" principle.

#### VII. *Sidgwick's Utilitarianism.*

So far we have discussed only the Egoistic type of Hedonism, and have ignored an important principle which, in Sidgwick's view, is as intuitively certain as that of Egoism. "Whatever action any of us judges to be right for himself, he implicitly judges to be right for all similar persons in similar circumstances." Here the emphasis on Reason is even startling. There is an obvious divorce from Egoism, and no obvious reference even to Hedonism, for, as he points out, the maxim is independent of our view of Ultimate Good. It is a formal principle, enunciated solely by the abstract reason, and bearing a close relationship to Kant's Categorical Imperative. It may indeed be regarded as the simple converse of the latter. Kant's principle is that, whatever act can be willed by me as a universal law, is right for me; Sidgwick's, that whatever act is judged to be right for me, I judge also to be right universally. The question then arises, which of these formulæ is the more fundamental and satisfactory? Simple conversion of hypothetical propositions, is illegitimate, hence the formulæ are not identical; one may be true, and the other false.

It will be clear, on examination, that Sidgwick's principle is preferable to Kant's. The universal applicability of a moral rule follows causally from its rightness; its rightness does not follow causally from its universal applicability. [The case is

somewhat similar to that of the two Kantian criteria of *a priori* truths; necessity, as Hamilton points out, is the cause of universality, and therefore not coördinate with it.] If this be the case, Kant's formula ceases to be a fundamental one; universality is merely a *proprium* of right conduct, and the real definition of rightness has still to be sought. Kant, by reversing the relation between rightness and universality only apparently supplied a definition of rightness; in reality, the whole question was begged. If universality follows from rightness we are not justified in deducing rightness from universality.

### VIII. *The Summum Bonum.*

What, then, is rightness? If the history of past thought is a sufficient guide there can be two and only two answers to this question. The answers have to be found either in a Hedonistic or an Idealistic interpretation of the Summum Bonum. Sidgwick chose the former, and by so doing, introduced, we consider, a fundamental inconsistency into his system.

It seems a hard thing to say of a reasonable system such as Hedonism that it is fundamentally and obviously false. And yet, unless it can refute the weighty declaration which Kant made at the opening of his first ethical treatise, it stands condemned of inadequacy. "A good will appears to constitute the indispensable condition of being worthy of happiness."\* The idea of *Desert* is a stumbling-block to every Hedonistic system; consequently, desperate attempts are made to get rid of it. But no Hedonist (to say nothing of other men who are not Hedonists) can destroy or explain away, sociologically or psychologically, this ineradicable principle. "The right of a being who is not adorned with a single feature of a pure and good will, enjoying unbroken prosperity, can never give pleasure to an impartial rational spectator."\* The most thorough-going Determinism is really powerless to destroy the conviction that happiness *ought* to go to the deserving and not merely to the prudent. Indeed it is Determinism which bears the clearest

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\*"Fundamental Principles," Abbot's translation, p. 9.

\*Ibid.

witness to the principles, for all Determinists object to regarding punishment as merely retributive. Why? Because they regard the criminal as unable to help his criminality and therefore as undeserving of retributive punishment. If he *were* a free agent retributive punishment would, they consider, be legitimate. Desert is therefore a fundamental notion alike to the extreme Libertarian, the extreme Determinist, and to the Rational or Self-Determinist. It is not *per se* a mere product of association, or of sociological or evolutionary conditions, though the latter, no doubt, have been operative in giving to it the weight of the social sanctions in which however it is itself implied.

Now Hedonism is unable to reduce this conception to lower terms. No analysis of the notion of Desert will yield the Hedonistic principle of Prudence.

Our analysis will, however, yield another notion, that of Rightness. It is the man who has acted *rightly* who deserves happiness. Is a further analysis possible? We think not. The notion of *rightness* is the ultimate *datum* of Ethics; it can be generalized, so as to apply to a life rather than to an act, but it cannot be resolved into anything simpler or more fundamental. When generalized it yields us the more or less definite notion of an Ideal of conduct, a Perfect Life or Being; it never yields us the notion of Prudence. The connection between the notions of Rightness and of Pleasure, if, indeed, there is any clear connection at all, is a synthetic and not an analytic one. In short there is, in Ethics, an absolute "Ought"; one that varies, no doubt, on its material side in savages and civilized, in determinists and libertarians, in fools and philosophers; varies, except in its "Oughtness." We find this fact implied in Mill's "Sense of Dignity," and in Sidgwick's confession that "oughtness" must be accepted as an "ultimate and unanalyzable" notion. Treat "rightness" or "oughtness" as a delusion, and no system of Ethics is possible. Sidgwick demonstrates this in the third chapter of his "Methods." Had he only consistently followed out the line of thought there initiated he would have arrived at a different conception of the Summum Bonum.

In contending that our common and ineradicable notion of "Oughtness" implies a Perfectionist and not a Hedonist Ideal we are not seeking to restore to Ethics any crude Moral Sense or Intuitionist theory, but merely to lop off Hedonistic excrescences which are merely a source of inconsistency and weakness. Happiness, we may well hope, is man's ultimate lot, though in face of the arguments of pessimistic philosophers, and apart from theological postulates, we can have little assurance that such is the case. Happiness may, as Kant expressed it, be a part of man's *perfect*\* good, but it is no part of his *supreme* good, nor is it his duty to seek to realize *mere* happiness either for himself or for others. "Mere" happiness, indeed, is the sorriest of social ends. The Summum Bonum is an ideal of Reason, an ideal constantly taking shape in new concrete forms, and differing therefore in this respect from the purely formal and abstract ideal of Duty which we find in Kant. Kant's ideal was, we may admit, too abstract, but it was at least pure; for he knew too well the folly of trying to build a system of Ethics upon non-ethical foundations. "Maxims which place the determining principle of the will in the desire of personal happiness are not moral at all, and no virtue can be founded on them."§ The ideal of Reason may, as Sidgwick contends, be vague, but somehow or other it is powerful; and, as keeping closer to reality, it avoids the innumerable contradictions which, from the dawn of Philosophy, have lain latent or patent in every system of Hedonism. Until Hedonism can clear itself of its contradictions, and can explain more intelligibly than hitherto it has done the simple phenomena of duty, desert, self-sacrifice, and quality of pleasures, we are bound to conclude that there is, somewhere or other, a fundamental error in its assumptions.

#### IX. *The Contradictions of Hedonism.*

It is here, in the admission of the Hedonistic contradictions that Sidgwick's work has the greatest significance. He has

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\**Consummatum* or *perfectissimum*.—"Critique of Practical Reason," Abbot's translation, p. 206.

§ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

started out from the assumption that the *Summum Bonum* can only be thought of, "in a cool hour," in terms of pleasure, or "Desirable Consciousness"; so far, then, as the actual nature of the *Summum Bonum* is concerned, he appears as a thorough Hedonist. But, after giving to the service of ethical Hedonism his keenest powers of intellect, he sees no possibility of reconciling into a single system its two forms, while, at the same time he cannot deny the ultimate rationality of each. Thus, through the very heart of Hedonism runs a chasm, which he can only bridge by a theological postulate. Two thousand years of philosophy have failed to present the world with a self-consistent ethical system, based on Pleasure as the *Summum Bonum*. Sidgwick has failed, like his predecessors; but, unlike them, he has not hesitated to set forth the inherent contradictions of the system with which he is in partial sympathy. The "fundamental paradox" and the still more "fundamental contradiction" stand before us unconcealed. May the truth not be that, somewhere in the Hedonistic system there is a "fundamental" error?

In these days we are wont to condemn the Ethics of Kant as formal and ascetic. The "formality" we may admit and deplore, and with its removal much of the "asceticism" will disappear also. But the more we examine the primary notions of Ethics the more we shall become convinced that questions such as "How can I best forward my own and other people's happiness?" are not ethical questions at all. Happiness is a "*proprium*" or "*accidens*" (perhaps a "separable" one) of Virtue; it can give no "ought"; it can be the basis of no system. When attempts are made to employ it as such a basis, results, such as those we have seen in Sidgwick's case, are bound to follow. Non-hedonistic principles have to be introduced to give any possible plausibility to the product; and even when pressed into service and employed to the uttermost, they fail to save the system from hopeless and glaring contradictions. Thus Sidgwick's work, coming at the end of a long series of other attempts at Hedonistic construction, bears witness not only to the inroads of Idealistic thought, but to the internal weakness and bankruptcy of Hedonism itself.

## POSTSCRIPT.

The following incident relative to Professor Sidgwick's own view of his work is told me by Mr. Oscar Browning.

Sidgwick had just completed his "Methods of Ethics." There lay the manuscript, accepted by Messrs. Macmillan. The author looking upon it said to Mr. Browning: "I have long wished and intended to write a work on Ethics. Now it is written. I have adhered to the plan I laid out for myself; its first word was to be 'Ethics,' its last word 'Failure.' "

The word "Failure" disappeared from the second and succeeding editions, but I doubt whether Sidgwick ever acquired a faith in the possibility of a perfectly satisfactory ethical system.

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## EDUCATION IN JAPAN.

THIRTY years ago, the Japanese people were practically where the Chinese are to-day; they were immersed in a sea of ignorance. In matters of art and manufacture, they went by a mere routine of practical experience, with no kind of scientific knowledge whatever. In religion and social usages, they were slaves of superstition, being in constant terror of offending the spirits of land, water and fire, of wood and stone. In politics, the narrowest particularism ruled the day, the patriotism and interests of a Japanese being confined within the narrow limits of one of three hundred principalities which split up the empire; a rudimentary sort of national sentiment being only noticeable in the universal hatred of "foreign barbarians." To be sure, there was an educated class—the Samurai—who had the monopoly of political and military privileges, who, numbering perhaps one-fifteenth of the population, were in a way highly cultured, remarkably free from popular superstitions and leading lives characterized by uprightness and devotion to duty. Yet the culture of these men was as one-sided as that of a Chinese mandarin; and in matters of science and the out-